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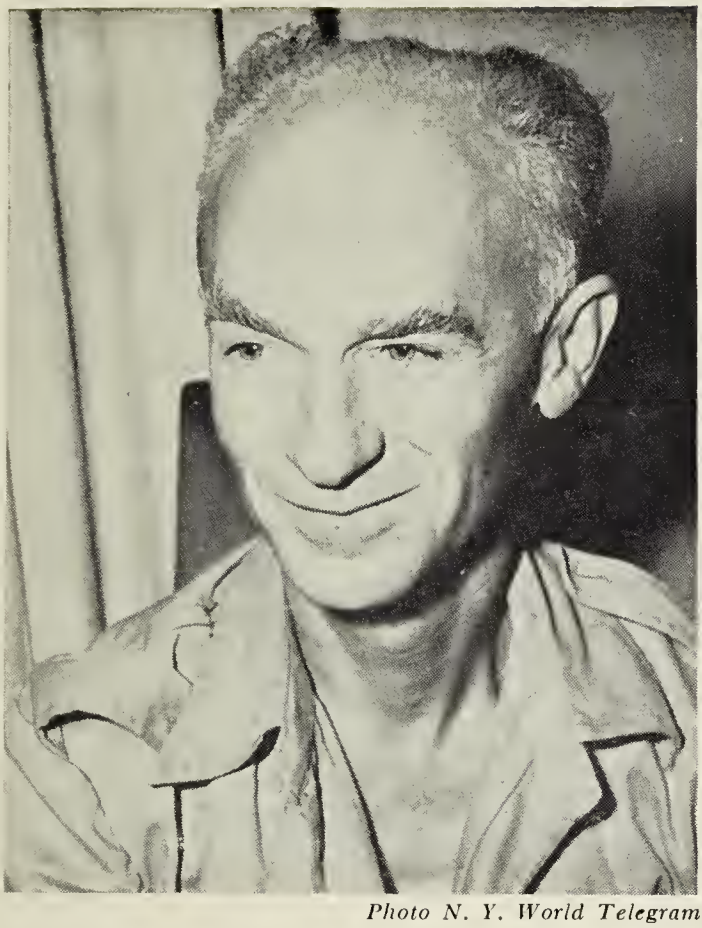


Photo N. Y. World Telegram

Letters

from a

LEPROSY COLONY

by

Ernie Pyle

NATIONAL LEPROSY RESEARCH

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Acme Photo

ERNIE PYLE'S death brings to mind what relatively few people ever knew—that to his incredibly capacious range of living he added in 1937-38 two weeks at Kalaupapa.

Kalaupapa is the leprosy colony in Hawaii, on an island called Molokai, made famous by the life and death of Father Damien (1840-1889) and by Robert Louis Stevenson's impassioned letter in his defense.

While visiting Kalaupapa, Ernie Pyle wrote a series of articles for the *Honolulu Advertiser*. Although he was not informed of some of the more recent and technical facts about leprosy and its treatment, he did one thing with the full weight of his reportorial talent: he made "lepers" human beings. That is why the American Mission to Lepers has asked and received permission to reprint the three articles which follow.

From a Human Dump to a Garden Spot

by ERNIE PYLE

IN my effort to dispel the myths about the Leper Settlement of Kalaupapa, I may have created a myth of my own—to wit, that Kalaupapa is and always has been a delightful place.

That of course isn't true. They are now at last making the physical plant a delightful place—but many of the horror stories of the past were based on truth. Kalaupapa was indeed a place of banishment, and only in recent years has the official attitude that a leper* is a human being begun to take shape.

Nobody knows how or when leprosy came to Hawaii. But the first vague knowledge of leprosy in the islands was recorded between 1820 and 1835.

Hawaiians seem peculiarly susceptible to leprosy, and once started, the disease spread like wildfire. A law for segregating lepers was passed in 1865. For the banishing place this isolated and natural-barriered spit of land was chosen. And the next year—January of 1866—the first bunch of 25 was sent here from Honolulu.

The government simply dumped them here, made no provision for them at all, abandoned them. They lived in caves, and grass houses and under trees. They ate fish and birds, whatever they could get.

It wasn't until 12 years after the first shipment that a doctor was sent over. Father Damien came years ahead of the first government doctor. Of course things have steadily improved since then, but you might say that only in the last half dozen years has a social consciousness stepped into Kalaupapa.

That came about during the administration of Governor Judd. He appointed an ex-army engineer to make a survey of the leper settlement. The engineer's report started things rolling.

*Here and elsewhere Ernie Pyle uses the word "leper" which more recent usage has begun to reject as a word debased by connotations of pity and terror. Nevertheless it is clear that his own feeling was exactly the unemotional, uncondescending one which has subsequently led to the rejection of the word.

A special board of citizens was set up to direct the leper institutions. The board began its operations on July 1, 1931. The board appointed a director, and the director is the man who made the survey—Harry A. Kluegel.

Vast improvements have been made since that time. Before 1931 there were no electric lights at Kalaupapa. No paved streets. No paid nurses. No movies.

Kalaupapa is now in the midst of a continuing program of improvement. Many streets are paved, and the paving will go on. A new hospital has been built, and a mental ward added. Old cottages are being torn down and new ones built as rapidly as possible. Sound-movie equipment has been installed in the theater. A new store and gasoline filling station has been built for patients' use.

A breakwater has been built, so that the weekly boat with supplies can get in. An airport was constructed, and planes now land here on their regular runs to the southern islands whenever there is necessity for it.

Trees and flowers have been planted everywhere. The settlement has a nursery now, with a non-patient gardener in charge. He has thousands of plants and shrubs ready to set out. Five years from now Kalaupapa will be a lush tropical garden.

In the Settlement today are about 60 outside workmen, hammering and building. They live in special construction barracks and do not come in contact with the patients. Plans already on paper will carry the work on for years.

Some day there will be either a private room, or a private cottage, for every person on the Settlement. There will be more nurses, and greater hospital facilities. And there will be a crematory, to end that mental and actual hazard of thousands of graves at the edge of town.

Above all, the man-to-man approach toward the lepers themselves has changed. I was impressed greatly with the non-prison-like atmosphere of this place. Patients aren't ordered around or spoken to harshly.

There used to be "Lepers Keep Out" signs all over the place. There isn't a one in the Settlement today. They know where they mustn't go. Why flaunt it at them? The whole approach is one of kindness and gentleness. The superintendent and the doctors and the nurses all

impressed me with their attitude of compassion and understanding.

There's one thing that most people don't know about leprosy in Hawaii. And that is that right outside of Honolulu is a leprosy hospital and receiving station.

Only the advanced cases come to Kalaupapa. The "suspects," as they are called, and those in the early stages, are kept in Kalihi Hospital at Honolulu.

Any patient can remain in Kalihi if he chooses. What the board is trying to do now is make Kalaupapa so attractive that leprous patients will volunteer to transfer down here. Last year 53 came of their own free will. The new program is succeeding.*

An Intimate Talk

SHIZUO Harada and I are friends now. We became friends through the simple process of sitting down and talking with each other. Our subject was leprosy. We talked about how it affects people—their minds, their attitude, their whole remaining lives.

Shizuo Harada could tell me all these things because he is a very intelligent man. And because he is a leper.

Harada manages the Settlement's general store for patients. I must leave his appearance to your imagination. I was introduced to him over the counter.

He is a small but well-built man in his early 30s. He was wearing a blue work shirt and blue dungarees. His hands were bandaged. He did not, of course, offer to shake hands. I knew he couldn't do that, but still I felt that he resented my wishing to talk with him.

We stepped into the warehouse back of the store for privacy, and I asked some questions about the volume of sales, and so on. It took only a few words to realize that Harada was a mentally keen man. Our conversation drifted from the store to Harada himself, which was what I wanted.

He went through high school in Honolulu,

*Some of the changes predicted in this letter have been effected; others have been delayed by factors growing out of the war.

and then on to the University of Hawaii. He graduated on June 5, 1925. And on June 21, they found he had leprosy!

It started as a numbness in his little finger. He was examined at Kalihi Hospital in Honolulu. "What were your feelings when you knew what it was?" I asked.

"I just couldn't believe it," he said. "I thought the doctors were wrong. I thought for years they were wrong."

Harada, like most of those who come to Kalaupapa, has no idea where he contracted the disease. There had never been leprosy in his family.

* * *

Harada being the broad man that he is, I was able to ask him intimate questions without embarrassment or offense. There was an unmistakable sadness about him, but I sensed no bitterness or hatred.

It has been nearly 13 years now since he discovered he had leprosy. "And up until three years ago," he said, "you couldn't have told by looking at me that anything was wrong.

"But three years ago it broke out, and once it started it came on fast. In a few weeks I became like you see me now. There is a possibility that some day I may have what they call a 'reaction', and be very sick and have a high fever, and then come out 'clean' and be almost normal again."

Later I asked Dr. Tuttle about it, and he said Harada was right. He said that if Harada did go through the reaction and come out clean (by which they mean sores heal up, enlargements diminish, and the appearance returns nearly to normal), he might live for many, many years, and might never have another flare-up.

But some patients never get this "reaction". A visiting Johns Hopkins specialist has suggested the possibility of using the new artificially induced fever machine to bring on this "reaction" in leprous patients. But there is not sufficient personnel here now to handle such a work.

Harada says he imagines there isn't a leprosarium in the world where the patients are treated better than they are here. But he feels that lepers haven't had a *fair break* from the medical world.

"The doctors don't know any more about it than they did thousands of years ago", he says. "So few doctors go into deep research on leprosy.

Of course you can't blame the individuals, because a doctor has to make a living, and there isn't any living in doing research on leprosy.

"Lots of my classmates in the university were studying medicine, and some of them have already made names for themselves and are well off. But not a one has gone into the study of leprosy. I don't blame them. They'd starve.

"There should be pay that would induce doctors to go into it. There are all kinds of associations and institutes to get up interest and help study other diseases, such as tuberculosis and cancer and so on, but there's nothing like that for leprosy."*

"The Happiest Day I Ever Had"

WE talked in the forenoon, and we weren't through, so we talked again in the afternoon. Shizuo Harada and I. A reporter and a leprous patient.

I said to Harada: "I had always thought of Kalaupapa as being a place of great gloom and dejection. But they tell me it is really a happy community, and it seems so to me."

Harada said: "Well, I guess it depends on the individual. Most of the patients are Hawaiians, you know, and they are by nature a happy people. They take things as they come. They aren't so much affected by being here as some of us.

"As for me, sometimes I feel in good spirits and sometimes I get way down in the dumps. We get down in the mouth, and then see somebody in worse shape than ourselves, and then pick up a little and say 'it could be worse'.

"And with me, I feel so often that if I could just sit down and talk about it—just get it off my chest as they say, like me talking to you here —then I'd feel better."

Harada says Kalaupapa isn't a normal community. Couldn't be. He says some want to be left alone, and almost go into seclusion.

*Mr. Harada and apparently Ernie himself, like the average layman even eight years later, were unfamiliar with the existence of the American Mission to Lepers, the Leonard Wood Memorial, the corresponding religious and secular societies in Britain, and similar ones in a few other countries.

"It does something to you after a few years here", he said. "I can tell it has done something to me, but I fight against it. I find myself getting like the old-timers who have been here a long time. You lose the spirit of—I don't know what you'd call it—the spirit of fraternity, I guess.

"That's the reason I've tried to keep busy and keep little activities going among the others. In school I was active in athletics, and in organizing things. Here I've got several leagues going—handball and things like that. I can't play myself any more on account of my hands, but I enjoy running the leagues. We had a semi-final yesterday. I wish you'd known about it.

"But it's hard to keep an organization going. There isn't enough permanency about it. You get some good key men, and the first thing you know they're gone. It takes the spirit out."

* * *

Harada has not yet suffered any extreme pain from his disease, although you'd think he would. There are two types of leprosy, and his is the less painful type. In most cases the disease seems to deaden some of the nerves. "I could break off my fingers and never even feel it", Harada said.

Sometimes he hasn't felt very well, and couldn't sleep, but he is proud of the fact that he hasn't missed a day's work since he took over the store four years ago. He is also glad of the opportunity to manage the store, for it gives him some slight way to use the knowledge he acquired in the university.

He majored in economics, and has read widely on political science and commerce. I imagine he would have been an outstanding man if he could have had a career.

"Do you do much reading now?" I asked Harada. His answer was one of the really sad notes in our long conversation.

"I used to", he said. "For a long time I kept on reading in economics and agriculture, which is a sort of hobby of mine. But now I've got so I just read light stuff whenever I get hold of a magazine. There isn't much point in trying to keep on learning. . ."

Harada is lonely, because there is no one in Kalaupapa that he can really talk with as he is capable of talking. No one whose mind has been trained and nurtured like his. A large percentage

of the patients are dull-witted, and were before they ever came here.

Harada apologized for saying what he did, and explained that he didn't feel himself any better than the rest. But there is a difference.

He feels that he is stagnating mentally. He told me of a former teacher of his who came down to the Settlement to see him one visiting day. The teacher told him she could notice that his grammar, which used to be perfect, now had many errors in it. He hates to think of things like that happening to him.

* * *

I said in yesterday's article that I felt, on being introduced, that Harada resented my wanting to talk with him. But as we sat and chatted, and the hours passed, I realized that this appearance was merely a facial expression given him by the disease.

He was as interested in talking of the psychology and philosophy of lepers as I was. He was eager, and kind. He said several times that if there were anything personal about the patients I could think of to ask, he would try his best to give me the answer.

But I ran out of questions, and then we talked about general things. He was interested in my job, and I told him of things I had seen in Alaska and other places.

I shall always have a mental picture, to the end of my days, of us sitting there talking. Sitting in chairs, face to face, not three feet apart. One "clean" and one "unclean", as Harada would put it. The truth would be, one "lucky" and one "unlucky".

But whatever our appearance, we talked and talked and talked. Thoughts are wonderful things, that they could put two people who are so completely far apart, on a shelf of harmony and understanding for even a little while.

When I got ready to go, Harada asked for my address, so he could write to me sometime. And as I handed him the paper and told him how grateful I was for the talk with him, he paid me the most touching compliment I have ever received, a compliment of such poignancy that I had barely the facility to acknowledge it. He said, with eagerness and deep feeling:

"You have given me the happiest day I have ever had since I came to Kalaupapa. Thank you. Thank you".

The American Mission to Lepers, in cooperation with sponsors whose names appear on the opposite page, various denominational boards and representatives of the governments, has initiated a Five-Year Postwar Anti-Leprosy Program looking toward the ultimate eradication of leprosy. Centers for the training of native doctors, nurses, and lay workers will be set up in eight countries. Booklet giving full description available upon request.

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